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Fall 9-1-2008

LS 395.01: Special Topics - Shakespeare: Comedy and Tragedy

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Justman, Stewart, "LS 395.01: Special Topics - Shakespeare: Comedy and Tragedy" (2008). *University of Montana Course Syllabi*. 11981.

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LS 395
Shakespeare: Comedy and Tragedy
Fall 2008

Though Shakespeare's plays are now conventionally sorted into four or five categories, only two have classical antecedents: comedy and tragedy. These are the very elements—the bedrock—of drama, and Shakespeare's plays evince a profound understanding of them. At the same time, Shakespeare was not content to confine himself to these two modes of composition, and even when he did write comedy or tragedy, he liked to complicate things by mixing in contrary elements. There are hints and speckles of tragedy in so perfect a comedy as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and streaks of comedy in *Othello*. Undeniably the greatest comic character in Shakespeare, and arguably the greatest in all of literature—Falstaff—inhabits a history play, not a comedy. The comedy of *Measure for Measure* is so dark and perplexing that some prefer not to designate it a comedy at all, but a “problem play.” Shakespeare's romances are neither comedies nor tragedies, but have something of both; they are like comedies darkened, or tragedies turned in a comic direction.

This course, then, explores Shakespeare's experimentation with the ancient elements of drama itself. We read plays in each of the Shakespearean genres, including the wild-card genre of the “problem play.” Upon completing this course, students should be able to read Shakespeare with understanding and facility (no mean feat), explain the different (but overlapping) categories of Shakespearean drama, show how the plays both employ and strain the distinction between genres, write with clarity and cogency about the workings of Shakespearean drama, and be able to comprehend and respond to good critical writing about Shakespeare, as by the philosopher Colin McGinn.

Readings

1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
2. *1 Henry IV*.
3. *Hamlet*.
4. *Othello*.
5. *Measure for Measure*.
6. *The Tempest*.
7. Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy* (chaps. 2-4 and 9-11 will be discussed in class).

Papers

Papers are to be no less than 1500 words, and are to be submitted as hard copies, not e-mail attachments. First paper, concerning either of the first two plays, due **October 6**. Second paper, concerning any one of the other four plays, due any time before **December 3**. Topics are open. Note that you are not being asked to submit a generic Marxist

reading of a play, or a psychoanalytic reading, or a feminist reading, but your reading. Think for yourself. In all cases be sure to know the text and cite it accurately, have a thesis, defend it well, and show mastery of the elements of composition. Consult the LS Writing Standards (to be distributed). Students aspiring to an A should submit papers of no less than 2000 words. Late work subject to penalty.

NB: Title of plays are underlined or italicized. Title of your own essay is not. Prose is quoted like prose (from margin to margin), verse like verse. Not "Everyone took their car," but "Everyone took his or her car" or "All took their car" or "Everyone drove."

I have assigned the McGinn book not because it is the last word in the understanding of Shakespeare (it isn't), but because it touches the concerns of our course, because it shows that interest in Shakespeare is not limited to professional critics or theorists, and, especially, because it provides a model of lucid, thought-provoking, jargon-free writing. While such writing looks easier than it is, all students in this course are expected to submit writing that is clear and correct. Take McGinn as a model.

Plagiarism

Categorically prohibited. See the "Plagiarism" language in the UM Catalog. For penalties incurred, see the UM Student Conduct Code.

Final Exam

An essay exam touching on most of the plays as well as the McGinn book. The two papers and the final exam will each count for a third of your final grade.

Attendance

Three absences are permitted, after which I will deduct a grade from a paper for each absence. *Use your three absences wisely.*

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"The verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known"—
Vladimir Nabokov

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